



The Rise of Baptist Republicanism

Oran Smith

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A Choice Outstanding Academic Book By championing the ideals of independence, evangelism, and conservatism, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) has grown into the largest Protestant denomination in the country. The Convention's mass democratic form of church government, its influential annual meetings, and its sheer size have made it a barometer for Southern political and cultural shift. Its most recent shift has been starboard-toward fundamentalism and Republicanism. While the Convention once offered a happy home to Harry Truman, Jimmy Carter, and church state separationists, in the past two decades the SBC has become an uncomfortable institution for Democrats, progressive theologians, and other moderate voices. Current SBC member heroes include Senators Trent Lott and Jesse Helms. Despite this seeming marginalization, Southern Baptist politicians have grown from political obscurity to occupying the four highest positions in the constitutional order of succession to the presidency. President Bill Clinton, Vice President Al Gore, Senate President pro-tempore Strom Thurmond, and House Speaker Newt Gingrich are all Southern Baptists. In its emerging Republicanism, the SBC has taken on characteristics of its more active fellow travelers in the Christian Right, forging alliances with former enemies (African Americans and Roman Catholics), playing presidential politics, establishing a Washington lobbying presence, working the political grassroots, and declaring war on Walt Disney. Each of these missions has been accomplished with calculating political precision. *The Rise of Baptist Republicanism* traces the Republicanization of the SBC's Republicanism in the context of the rise of the Fundamentalist Right and the emergence of a Republican majority in the South. Describing the SBC's political roots, Oran P. Smith contrasts Baptist Republicans with the rest of the Christian Right while revealing the theological, cultural, and historical factors which have made Southern Baptists receptive to Republican Fundamentalist Right influences. The book is a must read for anyone wishing to understand the intersection of religion and politics in America today.

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